

High schools

BASEBALL PREVIEW

FULLY LOADED

Baytown Lee's Ford a major pro prospect

By MK BOWER
Houston Chronicle

BAYTOWN — While traveling east on Interstate 10, that sound gets louder. After exiting north on Highway 146 to Baytown, the buzz only increases in intensity. By the time you get to the epicenter of it all — Robert E. Lee High School — the noise is almost deafening.

All of the fuss in Baytown these days is the hype surrounding Ganders catcher Josh Ford, a 6-2, 210-pound senior who caught the eye of professional scouts during his breakout District 22-5A MVP season last year. While Ford is a potential first-round selection in June's Major League Baseball draft, the person least fazed by the attention is Ford himself.

"I don't really worry about it," he said. "I just go out and play hard every day."

Ford's philosophy helps him deal with the pressure of being a top-flight prospect. A three-year letterman, he followed a strong sophomore season with an extraordinary junior campaign, hitting .553 with 14 home runs and 53 RBIs. Ford also scored 44 runs and had 11 doubles and a startling 1.068 slugging percentage.

Such whopping numbers, combined with his defensive improvement behind the plate, have scouts drooling. Throw in a selfless attitude and an unrelenting work ethic, and it is easy to see why Ford garners high praise.

"He's got every single tool that you look for in a catcher as a hitter," said Jason Becker of Lone Star Baseball. "He has foul-pole-to-foul-pole power, and he also hits for average. He gets (the ball) down to second base in under two seconds, which is always going to get a look from the scouts. He's just a big, strong kid that can do everything you ask him to do on a baseball field."

Said Lee coach James Hillin: "First of all, he is just a great person. He's also probably the hardest working kid that I have ever coached. When you have the talent that he has, and you combine that with his work ethic, then you are going to get great results."

Hillin is in his first year as Ganders head coach after serving 11 seasons under Gary Herrington, who retired after coaching at Lee for more than three decades. While Ford has a pretty good grasp on all of the draft hoopla, Hillin is working diligently to keep everything in order for what should be Lee's 10th playoff appearance in the last 11 years.

"It's been a big adjustment for me," Hillin said. "Obviously, this is probably the most publicized player that we have ever had at Lee, at least since I've been here."

Whether Ford is selected in the first round has little bearing on what he plans to do this season. He has already signed with Baylor, which has eased the burden of trying to showcase his talents for scouts. In fact, Ford feels he is a work in progress, and his focus is to continually improve while helping the Ganders make another run to the regional final, as they did in 1999.

"This team is pretty mentally tough," Ford said. "Even though there may be people out here watching me, we all have one goal, and hopefully this isn't a distraction. If we stick together and play really well, we have a chance of going a long way in the playoffs. That is one goal that we set and hopefully we can achieve."

Ford is more than just a one-dimensional package, providing reason for everyone in Baytown to have something to buzz about.

"The great thing about him is that he stays humble through all of this," Hillin said. "His goals are all team-oriented. He knows that all the rest of that stuff will come, because his talent is so



With improving defensive skills to go with a .553 batting average as a junior, Josh Ford has caught the eye of major league scouts.

All-Greater Houston teams

First team			
Pos.	Player	Cl.	School
P	James Loney	Jr.	Elkins
P	Ryan LaMotta	Jr.	Clements
P	Adam Laird	Sr.	Bellaire
P	Taylor Gartz	Sr.	Clear Lake
C	Josh Ford	Sr.	Baytown Lee
IF	Josh Barfield	Sr.	Klein
IF	Ryan Hamilton	Sr.	Klein
IF	Stuart Musslewhite	Sr.	Lamar
IF	Austin Sumerlin	Sr.	Spring Woods
OF	Vincent Blue	Sr.	Lamar
OF	Paul Porfiro	Sr.	Clear Lake
OF	Wardell Starling	Jr.	Elkins
DH	Chris Young	Sr.	Bellaire
UT	Jimmy Schultz	Sr.	Klein Forest
Second team			
Pos.	Player	Cl.	School
P	Paul Janish	Sr.	Cypress Creek
P	Brian Martin	Sr.	Texas City
P	Brooks Yeates	Sr.	Jasper
P	Scott Kazmir	Jr.	Cypress Falls
C	James Sweeny	Sr.	Bellaire
IF	Joseph Holland	Sr.	LC-M
IF	Chad Phelps	Sr.	Clear Lake
IF	Matthew Goodson	Sr.	Ball
IF	Chase Richards	Sr.	PN-G
OF	Chris Grimm	Sr.	Humble
OF	Jared Ball	Sr.	Tomball
OF	Jared Kaspar	Sr.	Katy
DH	Josh Baker	Sr.	Memorial
UT	Trey George	Sr.	Bellaire

great.

"He could easily go the other way and think highly of himself with all the attention, but he keeps things on an even keel, and that's why all the teammates respect him so much. They wish him success because of that fact."

Preseason rankings

Class 5A

1. Elkins (28-10 in 2000)

District 20-5A foes should consult the Farmer's Almanac for rain chances before facing the Knights' ace duo of James Loney (14-0 in 2000) and Spring transfer Wardell Starling. If pitching wins championships, expect Elkins to return to the state tournament.

2. Bellaire (28-2)

Another year, another powerhouse bunch. All-state RHP Adam Laird is the ace of a talented, deep staff, while the offense, with all-state C James Sweeny and all-district CF Chris Young, should be downright scary.

3. Clements (30-7)

The Rangers battled tooth-and-nail with Elkins last season, falling to the Knights in the regional final. Clements will be weaker offensively, but with RHPs Ryan LaMotta (11-1), Matt Albers and Wayne Ayo, pitching should be the Rangers' source of power.

4. The Woodlands (30-6)

The defending state champs suffered big losses (coach Mike McGilvray, 1B/P Vincent Sinisi, RHP Wes Smiley), but C Mike Kipper is back, as are the youngsters (3B Drew Dickson, DH Justin Darr and SS Aaron Cook) who sparked last year's title run.

5. Klein (17-12)

After a down season, expect a return to prominence. All-district middle IFs Josh Barfield and Ryan Hamilton are talented, and LHP Brad Cherry is experienced.

6. Lamar (21-10)

The Redskins may be the sleeper team in Region III. All nine starters return, including all-state talents Vincent Blue and Stuart Musslewhite, and so does three-fourths of the starting pitching, led by Rice signee Jeff Nieman.

7. Klein Oak (31-7)

The Panthers were hit hard by graduation, but five starters and 10 lettermen are back, including 1B Guy Humphrey, 2B J.R. Voyles and LF Carl Schindewolf.

8. Clear Lake (22-11)

The defending 24-5A co-champs return district MVP Paul Porfiro, a three-year letterman who hit .408 last year. 3B Chad Phelps and LF Brian Niemczak are assets, while LHP Taylor Gartz serves as the ace.

9. Clear Creek (28-9)

The Wildcats will have pitching depth with RHPs Mark McCormick and Derrill Naschke and LHP Kyle Bartosh. SS Eric Green and DH Adam Dempsey, both all-district picks, will supply the offense.

10. Baytown Lee (20-11)

This just in . . . C Josh Ford is pretty good. The reigning district MVP and potential first-round draft pick should get plenty of help, especially from four-year letterman 1B Luke Smith.

Class 4A/Others